Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

United Nations

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In 1993, as a result of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons from 1983 to 1992, Members States of the United Nations agreed on a new international document to focus world-wide attention on the need for equal rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities — *the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.*

Sign language is the first language of deaf people. Deaf women take a break to chat during a family-planning seminar.

Disability concerns every one of us and society as a whole

Disability is not a minority concern. It is part of the human condition, influencing directly or indirectly the lives of hundreds of millions of individuals in all parts of the world.

The incidence of disability caused by preventable diseases and natural disasters remains unacceptably high. Disability caused by violence against the body, mind and senses through war, acts of terrorism, torture or crime is increasing. In addition, economic and technological advances have led to new causes of disability, such as drug abuse, the pollution of the environment, stress, increased heart and circulatory diseases and traffic and industrial accidents.

A new approach to disability

For too long, persons with disabilities have been isolated, their right to development ignored, and their potential contribution to society neglected. The old attitude regarded disabled people as dependent invalids, in need of protection. It understood disability as a stigma, allowing society to send persons with disabilities to the appropriate address in the social structure, which, unfortunately, too often was the address of a special institution.

But times are changing. The proclamation of the International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 and the United Nations Decade of Disabled Persons (1983 to 1992) heralded a major shift in attitudes towards disability. The new approach stresses abilities, not disabilities; it promotes disabled persons' rights, freedom of choice and equal opportunities; it seeks to adapt the environment to the needs of persons with disabilities, not the other way round. It encourages society to enhance its attitudes towards persons with disabilities and assist them in assuming full responsibility as active members of society.

This philosophy forms the basis of the new international instrument, the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities, which will help translate the conceptual revolution into concrete and coherent actions of direct benefit to people with disabilities.

Equal rights and . . .

People with disabilities — as citizens of their societies — should have the same rights and obligations as all other citizens.

There is an increasing awareness by Governments of their obligation to grant equal rights to all of their citizens. It is ultimately the responsibility of all Governments to ensure that disabled people:

- Live as dignified and independent a life-style as possible within the community;
- Take an active part in the general, social and economic development of society;
- Receive education, medical care and social services within the ordinary structures of their societies.

Governments, through their legal system, can protect the rights of persons with disabilities.

. . . equal opportunities

Governments can enact laws to guarantee equality and to prevent discrimination. The cost of denying equal opportunities to persons with disabilities is high, not only in financial terms, but also in the loss of their contribution to society.

A recent trend emphasizes self-care and puts greater emphasis on increased support to the family and community to provide services for persons with disabilities. In many countries, such services continue to be concentrated in the private sector, financed by voluntary contributions. Such programmes are important, but they do not guarantee equal opportunities for disabled people at all levels of society. Governments should provide disabled people with permanent access to basic public services.

The untapped potential of disabled people will be realized only when Governments ensure that equal opportunities are given to all of their citizens.

Equal opportunities enable disabled persons to govern their own lives with self-respect and personal integrity

The Standard Rules

The Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities will guide the efforts of Governments and the United Nations to achieve equal opportunities for persons with disabilities towards and beyond the millennium.

A powerful tool in ensuring equal opportunities for disabled people, the Standard Rules:

- *Set standards for equal opportunities;*
- *Outline the action to be taken by Governments;*
- *Give guidance to all those engaged in the disability field;*
- *Include disabled people, their families and organizations as active partners in improving the quality of their lives.*

Although the Standard Rules are not legally binding for Governments, their application implies a strong political and moral commitment of Governments to take action. They **can** become international customary rules when applied by a great number of Governments.

The Standard Rules are not a list of ambitious goals; they are practical tools for Governments to improve the quality of life of each society and remove barriers that prevent disabled people from participating in society.

The Contents of the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

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The preconditions for equal participation

Without a solid base, equal rights and equal opportunities for persons with disabilities cannot be established. The Standard Rules therefore mention four preconditions — awareness-raising, medical care, rehabilitation and support services — which should provide a foundation for the equalization of opportunities for persons with disabilities. These prerequisites:

- Stress the importance of making all people aware of the needs, rights and obligations of disabled persons, of their potential and of the contribution disabled people can make to society;

- Emphasize the importance of protecting the physical welfare and well-being of disabled persons through effective medical care, rehabilitation and other support services. Such support assists disabled persons to reach their highest level of independence and functioning.

A woman with an intellectual disability making a statement at the General Assembly of the United Nations.

The target areas for equal participation

Persons with disabilities should enjoy equal participation in essential areas, such as accessibility, education, employment, income maintenance and social security, family life and personal integrity, culture, religion, and recreation and sports. When equal participation in these areas is achieved, the lives of disabled people will be improved by:

A change in their physical environment: persons with disabilities should be able to enter public buildings, use public transport and move about in their homes and communities easily. They should know what services are available to them, and have access to information and documentation through sign-language interpretation, Braille, large-print books, tape services and appropriate technology.

A change in their educational and professional environment: persons with disabilities should, in principle, be educated in the general educational system and have access to meaningful and gainful work; those with particular needs should have social security and income maintenance, where necessary;

A change in their social environment: the personal integrity and family life of disabled persons should be promoted — laws should not discriminate against them in matters such as sexual relationships, marriage and parenthood. Persons with disabilities should be able, if they so desire, to take part in the religious life of their communities, and to enjoy recreational activities on an equal basis with others.

The implementation measures

Proper implementation measures to achieve the targets for equal participation must be established. According to the Standard Rules, such implementation measures should include information and research, policy-making and planning, legislation, economic policies, coordination of work, involvement of organizations of persons with disabilities, personnel training, national monitoring and evaluation of disability programmes, technical and economic cooperation and international cooperation.

These measures spell out the responsibility of Governments to ensure, among others things:

- That legislation exists to protect the rights and guarantee full equality of disabled people;
- That the needs of persons with disabilities are included in all national policies and budgets;
- That organizations of disabled people are actively involved in the elaboration of national policies;
- That a national committee or similar body is established to serve as the focal point on disability matters;
- That access to equal opportunities is maintained by creating follow-up and evaluation systems.

At the international level, Governments should first strengthen their policies for disabled people and then work together to improve conditions for citizens with disabilities in developing countries.

The monitoring mechanism

Finally, to ensure their effective implementation, the Rules contain a built-in follow-up system, the monitoring mechanism, designed to assist Governments in their efforts to improve the quality of life of their society. Coordinated by a United Nations Special Rapporteur, this system will also incorporate the advice of disabled people, through their organizations.

The text of the Standard Rules is available in the six official languages of the United Nations: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish. If you require additional substantive information, or wish to have materials on the United Nations disability programme, please contact:

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